

# Existential Givens in the COVID-19 Crisis

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## Abstract

COVID-19 confronts humanity with an undeniable, unprecedented crisis. The focus of this article is the opportunities it offers for a proverbial pressing of the reset button by prompting pause and reflection on habitual patterns and serving as an “urgent experience” with the potential to spark revitalizing intentionality. Using Greening’s four dialectical existential givens—*life/death*, *community/isolation*, *freedom/determinism*, and *meaning/absurdity*—as a guiding framework, I explore imbalances in aspects of life in the United States that have been illuminated by COVID-19. Then, I employ existential–humanistic theorizing and research as a vision of how these dialectical forces can be transcended by confronting paradoxes posed by these givens (vs. simplistically overemphasizing either their positive or their negative aspects) and by activating the creative potential therein. Specifically, COVID-19 offers opportunities for individuals to relinquish an unsustainable and ineffective way of being inherent in and reinforced by the U.S. cultural narrative; to embrace ambiguity and tragedy; to actively identify, remediate, and reconcile underacknowledged and underactualized human capacities; and therefore to heal false dichotomies and become more capable of living fully, authentically, and flexibly. Accordingly, COVID-19 also provides opportunities for collective co-creation of a cultural narrative involving evolution toward enhanced senses of consciousness and caring.

## Keywords

COVID-19, existential psychology, paradox, creativity

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More than any other event in recent history, COVID-19 confronts humanity with an undeniable, unprecedented crisis. Consistent with existential–humanistic psychology’s focus on paradox and dialectics (Arons, 2020; DeRobertis & Bland, 2018; Rowan, 2001; Schneider, 1990), in Chinese, *crisis* refers not only to danger but also to opportunity. Regarding COVID-19, one need only open a web browser or switch on the TV for ongoing reminders of the challenges it poses and the tragedy it begets (the danger side of the current dialectic). As of early June 2020, there have been over 7 million confirmed cases worldwide, almost 30% of which have been in the United States, and over 407,000 deaths worldwide, with nearly 30% in the United States (Worldometer, 2020). In this article, however, I will concentrate on the opportunities offered by COVID-19, particularly in exposing imbalances and offering chances for a proverbial pressing of the reset button in aspects of life in the United States (and, arguably, its global reach in light of Americanization propelled by technology; Aanstoos, 2015).

Like any large-scale crisis, COVID-19 (a) pulls individuals out of their routines; (b) prompts pause (May, 1981) and reflection on habitual patterns of thinking, experiencing, relating, and behaving; (c) calls into question what people take for granted; and, thus, (d) serves as an “urgent experience” (Yalom, 1980, p. 31) that has the potential to spark a sense of revitalizing intentionality (May, 1969; Schneider & Krug, 2017). That is, it provides opportunities for existential learning, in which “something about a person’s life circumstances [is] changed such that [one] cannot go on as before” (DeRobertis, 2017, p. 43). Furthermore, during an era characterized by cross-generational anxiety (Julian, 2020) and by toxic stress (Baum-Baicker, 2020), COVID-19 also offers the possibilities of freedom from the known (Krishnamurti, 1969), of the wisdom of insecurity (Watts, 1951), and of second-order change (Bland, 2013, 2019, 2020; Hanna et al., 1995; Murray, 2002), also known as existential liberation (Schneider & Krug, 2017). Thus, rather than attempt to homeostatically cling to the familiar (Bugental, 1965, 1987; Maslow, 1999), an ineffective way of being is relinquished in order to clear a space to create something more sustainable to take its place. This entails surrendering preconceptions and typical *modus operandi*, opening to new possibilities, and actively identifying, remediating, and reconciling underacknowledged and underactualized capacities within oneself—the denial or avoidance of which can be a significant source of psychological suffering (Bugental, 1965; Maslow, 1999; May, 1967; Yalom, 1980)—and committing to a more promising future despite the inevitability of limitations beyond one’s control (Schneider, 1990).

In this article, I employ Greening’s (1992) elaboration of Bugental’s (1965) and Yalom’s (1980) four existential givens as a framework

for conceptualizing the opportunities afforded by COVID-19. Each of these dialectical givens—*life/death*, *community/isolation*, *freedom/determinism*, and *meaning/absurdity*—entails a paradox to which people have a choice to respond in one of three ways: (a) simplistically overemphasizing its positive aspects by assuming false triumph over the difficulties it poses, (b) simplistically overemphasizing its negative aspects by fatalistically surrendering to these difficulties, or (c) constructively confronting, creatively responding to, and transcending the challenge by embracing its nonduality. Given the inter-relatedness of these paradoxes, Greening (1992) stressed that psychological health and maturity involves the ability to accept and creatively respond to all four.

## Life Versus Death

Regarding the life/death paradox, Greening (1992) described how “we are alive but we will die, and we live in a world that both supports and negates life” (p. 111). A possible response to this paradox is to overemphasize aliveness and optimism, to deny death, or to attempt to defy it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, this has been clearly demonstrated by President Trump’s cavalier attitude toward the virus, as demonstrated in his controversially optimistic press briefings (Cancryn, 2020; Stengel, 2020). Furthermore, his inconsistency in and seeming ambivalence about acknowledging the hazards posed by COVID-19 have partially contributed to the United States taking longer than other nations to slow the spread of the pandemic (Levenson, 2020) and fuel the risk of additional waves of outbreak that are likely to overwhelm the U.S. health care system (Sun, 2020). In contrast, the second possible response to the life/death paradox is to assume a pessimistic, morbid obsession with death.

A third option, for which COVID-19 provides plenty of opportunity, is to celebrate and choose life knowing that one will die eventually and to actively embrace the reality of one’s mortality in order to come alive more fully (Yalom, 1980). “The possibility of death jars us loose from the treadmill of time” (May, 1953, p. 271) insofar as it provides a *boundary situation* (Jaspers, 1970; Yalom, 1980), a vivid and life-affirming reminder of one’s impermanence that makes it difficult for individuals to continue uncritically living out fixed patterns, engaging in compulsive or meaningless activity (Bugental, 1973), and/or taking life for granted and/or as something to be gotten through. Instead, confrontation with mortality provides a “turning point” conducive to “radical personal change” (Yalom, 1980, pp. 33, 38). Individuals become better capable of engaging in life authentically, courageously, creatively, and responsibly in accordance with their values (Ostaseski, 2017) by engaging

fully in the present moment knowing they have a future of their situated choosing (Krishnamurti, 1954; Schneider & Krug, 2017). At its best, by pushing life's impermanence to the foreground, they may overcome self-preoccupation and develop a greater sense of compassion and interdependence by recognizing death's universality (Ostaseski, 2017), as well as develop a sense of self-empowerment and self-determination as an alternative to conforming to death anxiety in U.S. culture (Feifel, 1969; May, 1983).

## Community Versus Aloneness

Greening (1992) identified this paradox as encompassing, on one hand, isolation ("no one has exactly the same existence that I do, and therefore I cannot fully share my experience," p. 114), and on the other hand, interconnection. "What fulfillment or distress we experience derives from the response we make to this need to be at once *apart from* all others and yet still *a part of* all humankind" (Bugental & Kleiner, 1993, p. 104). This paradox "makes for a peculiar poignancy" that people may contend with by emphasizing "either the apart-from or the a-part-of" while principally grasping the other side of the dialectic only intellectually (Bugental, 1976, p. 142). That is, they may employ, on one hand, social dominance or misanthropic rejection of others as means of protection against the unpredictability of intimacy, and on the other hand, passive self-denial and hypergregarious overinvolvement in relationships (Bugental, 1965; Greening, 1992). Moustakas (1961) proposed that these interpersonal and intrapersonal defenses serve to buffer against *loneliness anxiety*, as does social conformity, technologization, and compulsive activity—all of which have characterized the isolated and alienated social character of U.S. culture in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic (Aanstoos, 2015; Olds & Schwartz, 2009; Schneider, 2004, 2019; Turkle, 2011).

Alternatively, Greening (1992) proposed that the creative resolution of this paradox involves authentic interpersonal engagement—that is, "willingness to risk *I-Thou* encounters in a world that . . . often tragically entails *I-it* relationships" (p. 114). In a culture dominated by disproportionate extraversion (Cain, 2013) and by being "a genuine fake" (Watts, 1966, p. 53), the social distancing demanded by COVID-19 provides opportunities for "necessary . . . retreat from the world" (Moustakas, 1961, p. 50) and for slowing down (Schneider, 2019), both of which are conducive to cultivating an authentic and creative life. By allowing oneself to experience solitude (*existential loneliness*), a profound "relatedness to the universe is maintained" and put into action (Moustakas, 1961, p. 50)—characterized by commitment to social interest and by enhanced compassion for self and others (Greening, 1992; Maslow, 1987).

The affirmations of humanity at its best offered by COVID-19 are abundant. For every person admitted to a hospital, never to have further contact or closure with their loved ones before they die (Saslow, 2020); for every armed police officer guarding pallets of toilet paper at Walmart; for every entrepreneur stockpiling hand sanitizer for price gouging in the online marketplace (Nicas, 2020); for every UPS and FedEx employee faced with the threat of losing their job if they call out sick (Abrams & Silver-Greenberg, 2020), and for every person recovering from the virus who has been ostracized by their neighbors out of fear (Nir, 2020), there also are stories of hope, as heard on National Public Radio and/or as I have witnessed. These include the following: (a) landlords waiving rent for the month; (b) amateur stitchers banding together to sew medical masks for hospitals depleted of supplies; (c) local restaurants providing free meals; (d) neighbors offering pantry items to others on the block who need them; (e) teachers giving resources and emotional support to parents suddenly thrust into a new role; (f) insurance companies covering the full cost of videotherapy sessions without copays; and (g) employers increasing pay for their staff, even compensating for hours lost, with no strings attached. Imagine the implications of this shift from *I-it* to *I-Thou* if it is appropriately carried forward when social distancing eventually ends. That is, consciousness and compassionate presence (Schneider, 2019) can be cultivated as alternatives to long-standing hypercompetitiveness and categorization and commodification of other people in U.S. culture (Fromm, 1955; Maslow, 1971/1993; Moustakas, 1967). In recent years, these “mechanistic values” (Bugental, 1965, p. 312) have resulted in (a) indifference (Schneider, 2019), intolerance of differences (Schneider, 2013), and meanness (Arons, 2020); (b) emphasis on status at the expense of likeability (Prinstein, 2017); (c) false bifurcation of competition and cooperation (Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2015)—which, related to COVID-19, underlies “vaccine nationalism” at the expense of the United States contributing to a collaborative global effort to curb the pandemic (Smith, 2020); and (d) disproportionate harm posed by COVID-19 to underprivileged populations, particularly communities of color, due to their vulnerability wrought by systemic factors that include preexisting conditions spurred by toxic stress and inadequate access to quality health care (Bengali et al., 2020; Nagle, 2020; Stafford et al., 2020), as well as limited say as to when they must return to work and thereby put themselves at risk of contracting the virus (Torres, 2020).

## Freedom Versus Determinism

Greening (1992) conceptualized this paradox as encompassing one’s “finite capacity for freedom and choice” (p. 113). At one extreme, one attempts to

assert boundless freedom irrespective of its impact on others. At the other extreme, one may try to evade freedom as well as the responsibility of self-authorship and making choices (see also Yalom, 1980) via surrendering autonomy, becoming dependent on others, and engaging in enmeshed interpersonal dynamics and/or substance abuse.

Consider the college students who refused to give up their hedonistic spring break activities in Miami—followed by headlines a half-week later that at least five of them tested positive for COVID-19, which they brought back home to their communities (O’Kane, 2020)—or the antilockdown rallies where protestors have voiced their preference for “dangerous freedom over gov’t [sic] tyranny” (Deliso, 2020, para. 5), ultimately placing others’ health at risk (Gabbatt, 2020; Karson, 2020). These forms of reactive *negative freedom*, or *freedom from* interference, tend to reflect a sense of isolation and alienation (Fromm, 1941/1969) in U.S. culture. That is, the rugged individualism—and hypermasculinity (Kimmel, 2013)—suggest powerlessness and a longing for significance and connection in the face of ambiguity and the rapid social change of recent decades (Hochschild, 2016) that have begotten increased sensitivity to needs for social justice in U.S. culture while resources and infrastructure have remained insufficiently distributed to sustainably support it (Wilber, 2017).

Alternatively, a constructive response to this dialectic is the cultivation of *positive freedom*, or the *freedom to be* (Fromm, 1941/1969; see also May, 1981). This involves embracing new possibilities for oneself and actively and courageously living out one’s potentialities with awareness of and a sense of cooperation with humanity’s ecological situatedness (Schneider, 2019; Watts, 1958, 1966) as well as humble self-assertion (Greening, 1992)—versus “[insisting] on unchangingness” in oneself and one’s world (Bugental, 1987, p. 239). As Krishnamurti (1969) observed, “Freedom can only come about naturally, not through wishing, wanting, longing. Nor will you find it by creating an image of what you think it is. To come upon it the mind has to learn to look at life” (p. 71).

## Meaning Versus Absurdity

Greening (1992) suggested that this paradox encompasses individuals’ “finite capacity for consciousness, awareness, thought, and construction of meaning” (p. 112). One way of dealing with it is to assume the attitude of the *true believer* (see also Hoffer, 1951) whose fanatical ideological allegiance in the form of either hubristic scientism or blind faith (see also Arons, 2020) often involves an intolerance of uncertainty (see also Schneider, 2019) and of other points of view (see also Schneider, 2013). Applied to COVID-19, consider

the preacher who deliberately ignored social distancing protocol under the premise that his religious devotion would make him impervious to the virus that ultimately caused his demise (Jamison, 2020).

Conversely, another response to this paradox involves nihilistic anti-intellectualism. Campaigns against established knowledge and rejection of expertise in U.S. society in recent years may be chalked up to a reaction to the complexity and speed of contemporary life, compounded by hyperspecialization and some academics' failure to engage with the public (Nichols, 2017), while other academics have modeled preaching the gospel of *no truth* (Wilber, 2017). Consequently, consider the ongoing dismissal of medical and scientific knowledge about COVID-19 that has resulted in (a) friction between health officials and President Trump and some state governors about the appropriate timing for easing social distancing restrictions (Quinn, 2020) and about the time required to feasibly develop a vaccine (Salzman, 2020); (b) surging sales of prescriptions for unsupported antimalarial drugs that President Trump has not only endorsed (Gabler & Keller, 2020) but also acknowledged using himself (McCarthy & Greve, 2020); (c) the makers of Clorox and Lysol publishing warnings not to inject or ingest their products following Trump's remarks during a press briefing (K. Rogers et al., 2020); (d) a scientist's termination from the Florida Department of Health for refusing to manipulate data to support a case for reopening the state (Sassoon, 2020), and (e) numerous conspiracy theories such as the 5G wireless network being responsible for the pandemic (Gabbatt, 2020). All the while, Mogensen (2020) has cautioned against the proliferation of rushed research from *within* the scientific community in response to public hunger for new information in the face of COVID-19—which, taken out of context, has been a basis for misinformation.

A third possibility for confronting this paradox involves cultivating receptivity, curiosity, tolerance of ambiguity, flexibility, and the ability to make personal meaning. Bargdill et al.'s (2019) phenomenological study of the process by which individuals construct meaning from difficult experiences can be applied to COVID-19. First, an experience emerges unexpectedly that disturbs people's sense of everydayness and familiar predictability, makes them aware of their inauthentic behavior, and prompts them to respond more authentically. Second, the experience directs attention to life's fragility and to the extent to which they take things for granted. Third, the experience enables them to become more conscious of and to integrate their sense of identity, to develop a stronger sense of life purpose, and to appreciate the minutiae in everyday life. Fourth, the experience energizes personal growth and maturation, strengthens relationships, and motivates their achievement of significant life goals. Fifth, the experience has layers of meaning that are not



fully understood at once but rather unfold over time and lead to feelings of gratitude despite the mixture of negative and positive components. Taken together, these attributes of meaning-making in response to difficult experiences illustrate how COVID-19 provides opportunities to surrender ineffective ways of being and to cultivate more sustainable ones.

## Conclusion

In this article, opportunities for potential personal and collective growth afforded by the COVID-19 crisis have been identified. Using Greening's (1992) four dialectical existential givens as a guiding framework, imbalances in aspects of life in the United States have been explored from the vantage point of how COVID-19 has illuminated them. Then existential-humanistic theorizing and research have been offered as a vision of how these dialectical forces can be transcended by confronting the paradoxes and activating the creative potential therein (Arons, 2020; DeRobertis & Bland, 2018) and by employing the creative imagination to responsibly cultivate one's life trajectory (DeRobertis, 2017; DeRobertis & Bland, 2019).

Indeed, there is a lot of uncertainty in the face of COVID-19, which is undoubtedly nerve-wracking. On the other hand, the best means of confronting that uncertainty is to deal with it directly—without denial, machismo, or fear as defense against it but rather grounded in one's fluid center (Schneider, 2004). It is during times like these—without a predetermined script to follow (Bugental & Kleiner, 1993) and typically in the face of austerity and the threat of death (Camus, 1942/1946; Frankl, 1946/2006; Jaspers, 1970)—that humans are particularly capable of becoming their most profoundly creative. That is, people come to live more fully, authentically, and flexibly as they embrace ambiguity as well as tragedy and the paradoxical transformative potential therein (Maslow, 1996; Schneider, 2004). Furthermore, they are better able to accept what they cannot control and commit energy and focus to what they can, qualities that Maslow (1987, 1999) and C. Rogers (1961/1995) associated with optimal well-being and psychological health.

Consistent with existential-humanistic theorizing, by making necessary changes that both rise to and creatively respond to the “challenge in the chaos” (May, 1985, p. 138), individuals empower not only themselves but also others to work toward cultural change and social action (Arons, 2020; Eisler, 2007; Fromm, 1955; Maslow, 1971/1993, 1987, 1999; Rice, 2015; Richards, 2018; Tate, 1973) in a way that recognizes and appreciates common humanity while also honoring individual and cultural differences and contexts (DeRobertis & Bland, 2020; McQueen, 2018). The years leading up to COVID-19 were characterized by (a) “regressions to domination” (Eisler,



2007, p. 281) in the form of tribalism, xenophobia, and paternalistic authoritarianism; (b) a “machine model for living that emphasizes speed, instant results, and image over substance” that runs the risk of atrophying humanistic values (Schneider, 2019, p. 62); and (c) “Calvinism, capitalism, and competitiveness” that impeded social interest and contributed to isolation and crises of meaning and therefore contributed to experiential avoidance, compulsive activity, and toxic stress in the U.S. societal narrative (Olds & Schwartz, 2009, p. 29; see also Baum-Baicker, 2020). Arguably, these may be considered manifestations of collective *noödynamic* tension in which U.S. society has grappled with reconciling what it already has achieved versus what it still should accomplish (Frankl, 1946/2006) in terms of constructively confronting death, assuming an *I-Thou* (versus *I-it*) stance, authentically embracing the freedom to be, and actively making meaning out of exigent experiences, as illustrated throughout this article. Thus, despite the challenges it poses, COVID-19 also offers opportunities to collectively confront existential givens in the interest of cultivating “a clearer understanding of who we are, what we can be, and what is needed for a more sustainable, equitable, and peaceful global culture” as cocreative steps in the direction of “evolution toward the consciousness, caring, and creativity that are the true hallmarks of being human” (Eisler, 2007, p. 282).

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